

“My Favorite Philosopher”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

It would, perhaps, be reasonable if you have concluded – based on the title of my reflection, and on the quote imprinted at the top of today’s order of service – that you’re going to hear a sermon about John Stuart Mill this morning.

It would be reasonable – but it would be wrong.

John Stuart Mill, the British economist and philosopher best known for utilitarianism – a doctrine *not* to be confused with Unitarianism – was a 19th century British reformer whose other notable contributions included a lucid advocacy for equality of the sexes. But the extent of Mill’s contribution to this morning’s subject is summed up in the quote that reflects his admirable, but much maligned, ability to see most anything from multiple perspectives.

In making the claim that “in all intellectual debates, both sides tend to be correct in what they affirm, [but] wrong in what they deny,” Mill offers us words of warning it would be prudent to heed, in the environment of today’s highly polarized, ideological “culture war” – a warning it would also be wise for us to remember, when engaging in discussions having to do with theology.

And it is theology, of course, that interests me. Which brings me to the true subject of my sermon this morning: the radical, 17th century philosopher known to us as Benedict de Spinoza.

Ever since my freshman year in college, when I was exposed, in passing, to a philosopher whose ideas almost *intuitively* rang true for me – striking a chord of resonance deep inside a soul that I did not, at the time, even acknowledge having – ever since then, I have had an inkling that Spinoza, and I, were kindred spirits.

During my graduate school years – the same time period I referred to earlier, when a broad Romanticism that included Wordsworth and Coleridge,

Thoreau and Emerson, Whitman and Blake, infused my daily living with a heightened awareness of the vital essence of the natural world of which I was a part – Spinoza’s name kept popping up.

When I read, with eagerness, Jostein Gaardner’s masterpiece “Sophie’s World,” in the early 1990’s, it was the chapter on Spinoza that caught my eye. When, in seminary, a few years later, I made my first halting attempts to articulate my theology, professors noted that I must, in fact, have been heavily influenced by Spinoza.

Not in any conscious way, I replied – but it was comments such as those – comments such as that of one scholar who said, “Every countercultural person who discovers Spinoza, loves him” – such remarks began to take root, somewhere in the back of my head – waiting for the right moment to blossom into something more ... intentional.

Which is how, this past summer, at the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute in Virginia, I came to be in a workshop titled, provocatively enough, “Was Spinoza a UU?”

Well, to dispense right away with that rhetorical question – *certainly not*. Whereas Unitarian Universalists can rightfully lay claim to great minds such as Thomas Jefferson – we have no legitimate hold on the man born Baruch Spinoza, in Amsterdam, in 1632. He was the child of devout Jewish parents who had fled the Spanish Inquisition, to raise a family in the more hospitable, religiously tolerant community in Holland. Yet Spinoza’s biography *does* tend to read like that of many of UUism’s free-thinking religious ancestors, and – more significantly, for me – the belief system that he eventually developed is more congruent with that of *this* 21st century UU minister, than perhaps any other historical figure I know.

In short, Spinoza would, I suspect, at least be comfortable, with modern Unitarian Universalism.

As a bright, young Jew, Spinoza attended what amounted to rabbinical school, and learned Latin and German, while studying Jewish scriptures. As an inquisitive, gregarious young man living in the open society and heady air of awakening that was mid-17th century Amsterdam, Spinoza felt emboldened to engage in dialogue, and question much of what he was being taught.

Like another young rabbi of an earlier era, though, Spinoza’s insights and instigation soon ran afoul of the synagogue authorities, who feared attracting the attention of those who might use his outspokenness as an excuse to crack down on the local Jewish community. He was eventually *excommunicated* from the synagogue – a rare distinction indeed, and one

that speaks to the radical nature of his teachings. Observant Jews were even forbidden from coming within six feet of him on the streets.

The unorthodox beliefs he was espousing at the time – the heresies that led to his being an outcast, in his own community – were based on nothing more than his own, careful reading of scripture, and his own, careful study of the sciences and of nature. In other words, on things that virtually no one, in his day and age, did.

Here is what he had to say on the subject: “[My] method of interpreting scripture does not widely differ from [my] method of interpreting nature – in fact, it is almost the same... Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of [books] and inferring the intentions of [their] authors, as a legitimate conclusion.”

Spinoza was so ahead of his time in this regard that some historians have given him credit for *inventing* Biblical criticism. Others have gone so far as to call him the father of modern secularism. At the very least, he pioneered the contextual method of analyzing the Bible. Down to this very day, when our own Adult Religious Education course, taught by Jim Crocker-Lakness, looks at the Bible in light of its historical context, we are following in the footsteps of Benedict Spinoza.

Those footsteps, it turned out, led Spinoza on a far different path than the one his teachers and parents had envisioned. Shunned by his own Jewish community, he was embraced, for a short time, by liberal, Protestant intellectuals – only to be rejected, in due course, by them as well. His ideas were simply too dangerous and radical. Fearing for his own safety, he did not publish his most significant works during his lifetime.

Keeping to himself, alone in a tiny apartment in The Hague, Spinoza wrote incessantly, and earned a meager living grinding optical lenses. He died, at age 44, from respiratory complications caused by inhaling glass dust.

Yet somehow, this man became such a larger-than-life figure that Bertrand Russell could say of him, “He was the most noble and loveable of [all] the philosophers.” Upon discovering Spinoza, Nietzsche wrote, “I am utterly enchanted – I have a precursor!”

Even Einstein was effusive in his praise, declaring, “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists ... a God who [does not] concern ... himself with the fates and actions of human beings.”

Einstein’s unfortunate male pronoun notwithstanding, I must say that I, too, believe in Spinoza’s God. And like Nietzsche, I have been utterly enchanted to find a precursor who is such a spiritual kinsman.

This morning's hymn sings about Spinoza's God as well – “sparkling in everything that lives ... in greening grass that glory gives ... [breathing] within, both near and far.” The author concludes the hymn by summing up that God in one word: “Life” – Life with a capital “L.”

This morning's readings also speak about Spinoza's God. Whitman could have been channeling Spinoza when he wrote, “We consider Bibles and religions divine – I do not say they are not divine. I say they have *all* grown out of you, and may grow out of you still. It is not *they* who give the life – it is you who give the life.”

And Blake's immortal phrase – “to hold infinity in the palm of your hand” has echoes of Spinoza. So, too, our Doxology, which – incidentally – is my own adaptation of words originally penned by Samuel Longfellow, hymn number 25.

Yes, this entire worship service has been, in a sense, Spinozist – to use a word I learned this summer at the SUUSI workshop, where I discovered that, for years, without really knowing it, I have been a Spinozist.

Let me hasten to point out, when I say that – what I am not saying. I am not saying I am a scholar. I'm not the kind of guy who does much reading of original sources – particularly of Spinoza, whose writing is sometimes as dense and obtuse as it gets.

Nor am I a philosopher, or even a theologian – though I am a man to whom spirituality, and musing upon God, are very important.

And when I ponder God – when I experience my own moments of spiritual epiphany – what I come up with, what I seem to be encountering, appears to be remarkably congruent with what others much smarter than I – scholars, philosophers, theologians – have attributed to Spinoza.

Case in point: In reaction to the dualism of his much more famous contemporary Descartes, Spinoza reveled in the unity of all existence. He saw Life – again, with a capital “L” – as a single whole.

And he went further: He saw God, the Divine, whatever you wish to call it – not as separate from, but rather as *immanent in*, all that is. He pictured God as Being itself – Being, if you will, with a capital “B.”

Spinoza put it this way: “Whatever is, is in God – and nothing can either be, or be conceived, without God... God is the immanent, and not the transitive, cause of all things.”

Anything less all-encompassing, he pointed out – and not only pointed out, but laboriously “proved,” in the precise, mathematical, syllogistic way philosophers do these things – any other description of God, he noted, has the effect of limiting God – which is, of course, by definition, impossible.

Such is the beauty, and the power – and, to many, the danger – of Spinoza’s God.

Needless to say, he was accused by some of atheism, both in his own time, and long thereafter. Yet, a century after his death, devotees were moved to call him “the God-infused man.” The latter claim, by Spinoza’s definition of the word God, is certainly true; the former, nothing more than a paranoid distortion.

Hardly an atheist, Spinoza was, in fact, a *pantheist* – one who believes that God and the Universe are one and the same – one who believes that not only *he* is “God-infused,” but you and I are, as well. That the wind and the rain and the trees and the birds – the stars and planets our telescopes give us but hints of – all are equally infused with the Spirit of Life. And whereas each of the various individual parts of the whole are, by nature, transient – the greater whole, whatever proper noun you prefer to use to describe it – is, by definition, transcendent. It transcends space, and time, and thus, is eternal.

It is here that Spinoza introduces a concept I want to lift up for our special consideration this morning. He speaks of this immanent yet transcendent God as being “*sub specie aeternitatis*” – as experiencing everything (and I *do* mean everything) from the perspective of eternity. Like many an Eastern mystic, Spinoza reports that he was able to find ultimate inner peace – nirvana, if you will – enlightenment – only when he came to see beyond his own mortality, and his own persecuted, penniless existence – viewing life as a unified whole, from the perspective of eternity – the same way, he would claim, that God “sees” it – though his God is utterly devoid of such anthropomorphisms.

It’s all about perspective.

Here’s another way I like to think of it. Let’s take a number – a composite, or non-prime number. Just for fun, how about “42”...

So we have the number 42. You, and I, are smaller numbers, numbers which can either multiply, or add up to, 42. For the sake of discussion, I’ll be 6 and you can be 7. When multiplied, we equal 42. When added in with other numbers, we also equal 42.

Spinoza might say, God is 42. In fact, 42 is all there really is. And since, to Spinoza, “happiness consists of perceiving things in the light of eternity,” our ultimate happiness, in this little exercise, is in knowing that 42 truly is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything!

Rather than distracting ourselves with petty arguments over whether your 7 is better than my 6 – rather than obsessing over the difference between our numbers, or between another person’s 3 and someone else’s 14

– Spinoza would have us focus our attention, and our reverence, on 42. Then, and only then, can we, in Blake’s words, “hold infinity in the palm of our hands.”

It is with this kind of perspective that I try to see the world, and my own existence. I am comforted more by the belief, deeply held, that – brief though my lifespan may be – I am part of something beautiful, eternal, and unimaginably *big* – than I can ever be by any doctrine, which I cannot, in good conscience, rationally accept, that tells me of my individual, eternal soul which will, upon my death, join other such souls in a realm above and beyond this natural universe.

There are, of course, some corollaries to Spinoza’s pantheism – natural consequences of this line of thinking which – though they trouble many others – are, again, comforting to me – particularly inasmuch as they reflect my own, intuitive, pre-Spinozistic thinking. One has to do with evil.

In a universe such as Spinoza’s, there is no such thing, as good and evil – except as they exist in our own, limited, human interpretation of events. His theology does not need to explain evil as “separateness from God” – since there can be no such *thing* as separateness from God. Nor is Spinoza put in the uncomfortable position of having to explain why bad things emanate from God – the kind of rationalizations that, all too often, end up painting a portrait of a vengeful, angry God.

In a letter to a friend, Spinoza writes, “In the language of philosophy, it cannot be said that God desires *anything* of any man, nor that anything is displeasing or pleasing to [God.]”

Elsewhere, he elaborates: “As for the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ they indicate no positive quality in things regarded in themselves... One and the same thing can be, at the same time, good, bad and indifferent. For instance, music is good for him that is melancholy; bad for him that mourns. And for him that is deaf, it is neither good, nor bad... Whatsoever [a person] deems to be hurtful and evil, and whatsoever accordingly seems ... impious, horrible, unjust and base – assumes that appearance owing [only] to [our] own disordered, fragmentary and confused view of the universe.”

Though some may be disturbed to hear me say it, I fully agree. To me, our human concepts of good and evil, relevant as they are in this world, in this lifetime, are – from the perspective of eternity – from the perspective of the Divine, unclouded by qualification or judgment – are simply parts of the whole, pieces of the puzzle. And it is the whole, to which our eyes should be turned.

Another aspect of Spinoza’s theology that appeals to me is something I have already alluded to – the utterly confident way in which he

de-anthropomorphizes God. And, by extension, the way he levels the playing field for all of life. Humanity is not the crown of creation. Though we are more conscious, and self-conscious, than our animal friends, all belong within the Divine unity. What radical implications this has, for how we might treat our fellow creatures, and our planet earth.

“A mouse, no less than an angel,” he writes, “and sorrow, no less than joy... Neither the honest man, nor the thief, can cause God any pleasure, or displeasure.”

Again, I couldn't agree more.

Yet were it merely the uncanny congruence of Spinoza's theology with my own, I would not be here today calling him “my favorite philosopher,” and referring to myself as a Spinozist. There's a whole other branch of Spinoza's thought that resonates with me – namely, his politics.

In a book titled, in Latin, “*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,” Spinoza laid out his vision of the ethical society – a democratic community that was way, way ahead of his time. He argued that government should exist for only one purpose: to insure individual freedoms – freedom of thought, of speech, of expression and – yes – of religion.

“The object of government,” Spinoza writes, “is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets (I love that phrase, and how it applies to *our* government, today!), but to enable them to develop their minds and bodies in [complete] security, to employ their reason unshackled... The true aim of government is liberty.”

Keep in mind that these words were written, in Europe, in 1670. It is, indeed, no coincidence that Spinoza had an honored place in the library of Thomas Jefferson.

As for me – I own no copies of the “*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,” in either Latin or English – no copies of the “*Ethica: Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*.” I don't even own a copy of the aptly titled “Spinoza: A Guide for the Perplexed,” though I must say, I eagerly await the publication of “Spinoza for Dummies.”

Seriously, though – what I do have is a couple of yellowed philosophy textbooks – a couple of works of fiction in which Spinoza, and his philosophy, play key roles – and a file folder full of quotes. Taken together, they are enough to make me comfortable saying that, not only is Baruch Spinoza my favorite philosopher – he's one of my primary spiritual guides.

I conclude, this morning, with a couple more quotes from the aforementioned file:

“I believe [democracy] to be, of all forms of government, the most natural, and the most consonant with individual liberty.”

“What is meant in scripture by a miracle, can only be a work of nature which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, human comprehension.”

“Inward worship of God, and piety in itself, are within the sphere of everyone’s private rights, and cannot be alienated.”

And, finally:

“He who seeks to regulate everything by law, is more likely to arouse vices, than to reform them. It is best to grant what cannot be abolished.”

Words of wisdom – for Spinoza’s time, and for ours.

Blessed be. Namaste.